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AUTHOR	Hunt, Martin F., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

Because of the great density of people in cities, residents of urban centers have unique problems of human interaction and communication. Because of population density and the large number of information networks, communication research in urban settings should center on the ways in which residents cope with the variety of message inputs and, at the same time, try to effect their own communication impact. Two interacting communication subsystems are the demands placed on the individual by the urban community and the demands placed on the system by the individual. Suggested topics for communication behavior studies include: the effect of infringement of personal space on communication patterns within and between living units, the relationship between increasing population density and responsibility for one's personal verbal behavior, and the effects of increased needs for public transportation on the persuasiveness of messages relating to transportation use. Speech communication departments in urban centers can focus research on the interaction between message effectiveness and population density. (RN)

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Communication Research in Urban Centers

Martin F. Hunt, Jr.

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The research question proposed to this Action Caucus is both relevant and valid. The fact that two out of three Americans live in one of the twenty major urban centers (Adelson & Kalis, 1970, p. 17) underscores the need for communication research in urban centers. These centers with their great densities of people have unique problems--especially problems involving human interaction and communication. Calls for relevancy can be legitimately responded to in investigation of communication in these urban centers. Commuters riding into New York City are greeted by billboards asking them to "give a damn". Increasingly, social scientists are being asked to bring their expertise to social problems of uroan centers. Researchers themselves are asking for relevance. Gary Cronkhite stresses a need for social relevance in his appeal to the 1968 New Orleans Conference on Research and Instructional Development.

> . . .(1) scholars must become more interested in making public the results of their research; (2) scholars must set about deliberately to make their research relevant to the real communicative problems of a real society. (p. 115)

The report of the conference, itself, contains the recommendation:

> The conference participants encourage speech communication scholars to design and execute research dealing with the speech communication dimensions of current social problems. (p. 25)

While I would not suggest that the exclusive research focus of speech communication departments located in urban centers should be on communication in urban settings, certainly this is one of the areas that should be systematically studied.

In this paper I shall try to: (a) briefly restate and illustrate the function of communication research in general; (b) suggest a particular class of communication variable associated with urban settings that is particularly fruitful for investigation; and (c) suggest some research designs appropriate for an initial investigation into this area. Perhaps this caucus can use these suggested variables, research questions, and research designs for points of departure for discussion of research and research priorities in urban centers.

The Role of Communication Research

Communication research has the message as its principle focus. The 1968 Report of the New Orleans Conference recommends that spoken symbolic interaction should be the central focus of communication research.

> Research in speech communication focuses on the ways in which messages link participants during interactions. Emphasis is on the behavioral antecedents and consequences of messages and their variations as well as on the ways that messages interact with communication participants to produce behavioral outcomes. (p. 33)

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The focus of communication research is not on the source of the message, nor on the receivers, nor on external variables except as these types of variables interact with messages. It is easy to name variables which are interesting but which do not fall within the realm of communication research. For instance, personality variables qua personality variables do not fall into the realm of communication research. While ecology is certainly a relevant social issue, ecology in and of itself is not appropriate for study. Persuasive messages urging ecological practices or analysis of ecological campaigns would be valid, however. Likewise, the use of land, transportation, helping behavior, automation, drug use, and alienation are not appropriate for the central focus of communication research. Messages about these issues are.

Perhaps I am overstating my point, but one can easily be seduced away from the research focus most appropriate for speech communication scholars. The author recently became involved in a student's proposal to study the effects of the presence of others on the facilitation of task performance. While an interesting study, no message was being manipulated or studied. The task was not a message encoding task--but a physical task. Hence, the study was dropped. In examining what the unique role of communication research should be for departments of speech communication located in urban settings, care should be taken to keep the focus of the research on messages and their interactions with variables particular to urban settings.

Communication Variables in Urban Centers

A whole class of variables in urban settings that do fall within the scope of communication research centers on the ways in which urban dwellers cope with the phenomenal amount of message input while at the same time striving to have their own effective communication impact. It seems to me that one of the most distinguishing characteristics of urban centers is the density of the population within the city and the resulting, almost infinite, number of communication networks available. Cities are characterized, in part, by a high density of people. This point is well illustrated by an excerpt from Fabun's The Dynamics of Change.

> In Colonial America the average density of persons was one per square mile. In a circle 20 miles in diameter (figured on the basis that 10 miles was the greatest distance a person could walk to work and back and still do a full day's work) this yields 314 persons inside the circle with the rather obvious chance of human contact of 313 to 1. The opportunities for interpersonal communication--the exchange of ideas and information--were rather limited.
>
> Today Chicago has a population density of 10,000 persons per square mile, inside a 20 mile-diameter circle. Opportunities for human-to-human contact are more than 3 million to 1. (1967, p. 15)

The general class of variables which need to be studied by speech communication scholars are those message variables which interact with population density. Consider the (suspected) prescription that people in less dense centers of living are expected to at least acknowl[illegible] the presence of other persons on the streets. On the other hand, people in high [illegible] urban centers are implicitly expected to minimize their acknowledgements of others--there are just too many people and frequently acknowledgements can lead to unwanted involvement. Panhandlers and tourists to New York City provide an interesting example of this point. During my first visits to

New York City, I was constantly blocked by panhandlers seeking my money. They seemed to be able to spot me as a mark in the midst of a crowd of other people. Gradually, and without realizing it, I found myself unaccosted as I made my way across midtown Manhattan. The panhandlers ignored me in favor of my out-of-town companions. When my friends brought this phenomenon to my attention, we tried to discover the reasons. Our conclusion was that my nonverbal behavior was markedly different from theirs. Visiting from less dense centers, my companions sought out eye contact with people on the street (or at least, did not avoid it). They quickly found that the only people who would meet their eye contact were the panhandlers who--once making eye contact--maintained it to trap my friends into paying a small toll for their release. Sensitized to this hypothesis, we observed other differences in our nonverbal gestures. Behaviors which also seemed to attract the attention of panhandlers were: paying attention to the human and motor traffic, openly moving out of oncoming pedestrians' paths, and smiling. On the other hand, I made no eye contact with the people on the street, minimally looked at displays, and maintained a more neutral facial expression. While certainly not a controlled experiment, this example does suggest that people do adapt their communication behavior to cope with population density. The ways in which these communication behaviors are developed and maintained and the adaptive and the maladaptive functions they provide the individual are certainly pertinent and socially relevant communication research issues worthy of our consideration.

The urban community as a communication system can be broken down into at least two interacting subsystems--the demands placed on the individual by the community, and the demands placed on the urban system by the individual. Not only is the individual the target of a tremendous number of messages, the messages are competing with each other for his attention. The best efforts of advertising agencies vie to capture and to hold a person's attention and interest (and money). A person is under continual visual, aural, tactile, and olfactory bombardment. While the major part of these competing messages are unnecessary for the person to attend to, a small portion he must heed in order to maintain his existence and his safety. Another subset of messages--while not pertaining directly to his maintenance and safety--are none-the-less relevant to his needs for amusement and recreation. Finally, the last and by far the largest subset of messages impinging upon him are not only peripheral to his needs but occasionally harmful. All of these demands are modified by and interact with the density of the population of the community. To illustrate this point and to note potential communication variables, consider the following listing.

Low Density	High Density
1. Low infringement upon personal space	1. High infringement upon personal space
2. Little violence associated with space infringement	2. Greater violence associated with space infringement
3. Separate and individual housing	3. Crowded and mass housing
4. Personal space determined by choice	4. Personal space determined by availability
5. Personalization	5. Depersonalization
6. Personal and private transportation	6. Impersonal and public transportation
7. One community	7. Several subcommunities
8. Usually one language	8. Usually several languages
9. Personal responsibility for action [Ed. note: perceived?]	9. Lack of personal responsibility for action [Ed. note: perceived?]
10. Responsibility to community	10. Little responsibility to community
11. Low noise	11. High noise
12. Control over noise	12. No control over noise (less?)
13. Relatively great message fidelity	13. Low message fidelity
14. Relatively great message impact	14. Low message impact

The variables listed above are the ones that easily come to mind; obviously the list can be expanded. Also, the interactions among these variables and communication can be examined from at least two standpoints. The first would be the standpoint of the effect of these variables on communication behaviors (communication being the dependent variable); the second standpoint would be the influence of communication variables on these variables (communication being the independent variable). Some research questions that can be generated from the above list are listed below. Generally as density increases:[Ed. note: these factors appear to be of a correlational nature.]

1. What are the verbal and nonverbal cues a person uses to defend against infringement upon his personal space?
2. As living space is reduced what happens to the communication patterns both within and between living units? and in terms of quantity, direction, and functions of the communication?
3. How does a person separate messages important to him from all the messages impinging upon him?
4. How do definite ethnic and language subgroups within a community interact with message strategies aimed at chang ? [Ed. note: or at stemming change?] and,
5. What kind of between group code translation process takes place?
6. How does mass media usage vary?
7. How does the competition for territory affect interpersonal communication networks?
8. What is the relationship between increased need for public transportation and information dissemination?
9. As one moves from a personal to an impersonal environment, what [Ed. note: different?] kinds of messages or message strategies are accepted? and,
10. Does less responsibility for personal action increase as indexed by more hostile and offensive verbal behavior?
11. What are the interactions between information and fidelity?
12. How do information diffusion patterns vary?

These are some of the research questions that can be generated from examining the list of density-related variables presented previously.

Research Designs

In the remainder of the paper, possible pilot studies are suggested. These studies should not be considered as definitive, but rather as points of departure for a series of research programs.

A. Infringement on Personal Space (Question 2)

This first study suggested is designed to compare two kinds of personal space infringement. Personal space can be infringed upon by family members and personal space can be infringed upon by [Ed. note: the larger] society. The design of this study is summarized in the following table.

Family Infringement	Societal Infringement: High	Societal Infringement: Low
high	ghetto housing	small, urban house
low	luxury apartment in a large city	large suburban house and land

The kinds of housing suggested in the above table could be sampled and the communicator patterns, quantity of communication, etc., could be examined. For instance, verbal aggression, some of the Bales Interaction Categories, propinquity, etc., could be identified.

B. Responsibility for Personal Action (Question 10)

As density increases, would responsibility for personal verbal behavior decrease? That is, would the amount of verbal hostility (including cursing, ethnic slurs, etc.) in response to varying degrees of provocation increase as density increases? An experiment which might test this question is summarized below.

		Density		
		Low	Moderate	High
Provocation	low			
	moderate			
	high			

[Ed. note: a third factor might be resultant communication behavior.]

Density would be operationalized in terms of specific cities (e.g., low--a small town such as Willimantic, Connecticut; moderate--Hartford, Connecticut high--New York City or Boston). Provocation would be operationalized as reason for the delay a taxi passenger would experience in reaching his destination. For instance, low provocation--15 minutes delay caused by the driver having to deliver some medicine "on the way"; moderate provocation--15 minutes delay caused by the driver having difficulty starting the engine; high provocation--15 minutes delay caused by the driver running a personal errand. A tape recording could be made in the cab and be subjected to content analysis later.

C. Transportation and Fidelity (Questions 8 and 9)

As one moves from low to high density living centers, there is increased need for transportation and an increased number of messages directed at its use. As the transportation system becomes more complex, information on its use becomes more important, but the fidelity of the messages might be decreased. A research problem would be to determine what kinds of channels and what kinds of messages would be effective in high density urban areas for increasing effective volunteer use of public transportation. In the field experiment proposed here, a large office building might be selected and a persuasive campaign could be launched designed to convince people to voluntarily use elevators as express elevators (i.e., certain elevators for floors 1-5, others for floors 6-10, etc.). The study would involve determining the most effective kinds of verbal and nonverbal messages--i.e., messages that would be perceived and then voluntarily followed.*

* [Ed. note: Similar targets could be that communication related to obtaining necessary services, e.g., utilities and medical, social and legal assistance.]

Obviously, these suggested studies are in skeleton form; but they do suggest certain possible avenues of research that could be pursued and they also point up the importance of conceptual and operational definitions. Too often the development of a field of research is hampered by unsystematic and almost random conceptual and operational definitions of variables. It would seem to me that one of the benefits of an Action Caucus such as this would be the opportunity to isolate and to conceptually define key variables that would lead to acceptable and consistent operational definitions. In short, I am suggesting that the role of speech-communication departments located in urban centers is to coordinate and to focus communication research on the interaction of messages and density--related variables and that one of the first steps would be to develop valid conceptual definitions which are well tested. Such reliability is necessary in order that research results can serve as building blocks for future research and theory development.

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